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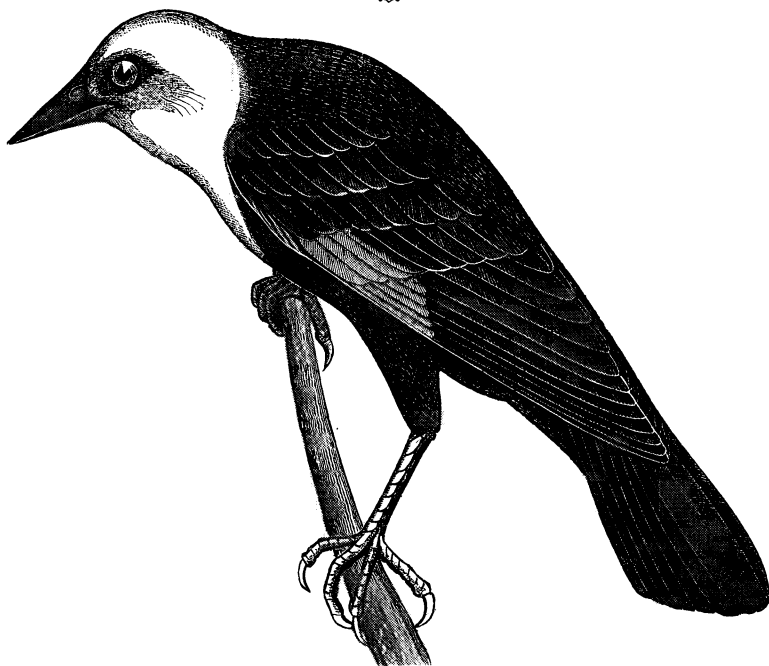
T H E  
AMERICAN NATURALIST.

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THE YELLOW-HEADED BLACKBIRD.

BY DR. ELLIOTT COUES, U.S.A.



WE are indebted for the discovery of this beautiful species to Major Long's memorable expedition, which largely increased our

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then imperfect knowledge of the zoölogy of the West. Bonaparte first published an account of the bird, with a good figure, in his continuation of Wilson's Ornithology, in 1825. It is not so strictly a western species as is generally believed; for in its partial northward migration it ranges obliquely to the eastward, until in British America it reaches a meridian of longitude which it is not known to attain in the United States. It inhabits the region about the Saskatchewan and Red River of the North; and we have Prof. Reinhardt's authority for its presence even in Greenland. Sir John Richardson mentions its abundance at the fifty-eighth parallel, where, however, it is found only in summer. It is singular that it should breed in these almost hyperborean regions, and in the warm parts of New Mexico, Arizona, and California; yet such is the fact. The partial migration just mentioned, which occurs with many birds besides this one, may be explained in two ways. Either the birds bred at the north retire before winter, and return again in the spring, while those reared further south remain stationary, or else there is a north and south oscillation of all the individuals, not of sufficient length to carry them away from any localities except at the extremes of their range.

The *Xanthocephalus icterocephalus*, as this species is called, is one of our handsomest blackbirds, the body being glossy black, the head, neck and breast rich yellow, and the wings having a white spot. The female is smaller than the male, and plain dark brown, with the yellow of the head restricted and clouded over. Together with the Lark Finch (*Chondestes grammacus*) and Prairie Hen, it is one of the earliest indications that the westward bound traveller has of approaching a different ornithological region. I saw some on the prairies of Wisconsin, and a great many in Kansas, at a place called Salinas, supposed by courtesy to be a town, although it consisted chiefly of a very dirty shed for a stable, and another smaller one, a shade cleaner, for a hotel. The birds were the most agreeable inhabitants of the place, and I whiled away some hours in watching them feeding in flocks about the stable yard, with some Cowpen birds and Doves. They were very tame, and would only fly off a few yards when shot at. Salinas is not far from Junction City and Fort Riley, a locality where so many Eastern and Western birds are found together, that it is particularly interesting, as the following extracts from my notebook will show. The memoranda were made during a week's stay, in which time over a hundred specimens were secured.

“Republican Fork, near Fort Riley, *May* 22, 1864. — Large numbers of Semipalmated and Bonaparte’s Sandpipers (*Ereunetes pusillus* and *Actodromas Bonapartei*) along the river, mixed together in close flocks. Not fat at this season. Plenty of Baltimore and Orchard Orioles, in the high trees; Yellow-breasted Chats in the bushes; Yellow-winged Sparrows and Black-throated Buntings everywhere; Meadow Larks in the open, and Partridges in the woods. Shot a pair of Red-bellied Woodpeckers, breeding. Saw for first time the Clay-colored Bunting. *May* 23. — Found two very interesting birds I never saw alive before — Bell’s Vireo, and Nuttall’s Whippoorwill (*Vireo Belli* and *Antrostomus Nuttalli*). The former seems quite common; shot several specimens; it inhabits thickets and clumps of bushes, like *V. noveboracensis*, but has a different song, the peculiarity of which first attracted my attention. The Whippoorwill was flushed in thick cover, and looked very much like a woodcock as it got up; its night cry is like that of the Eastern species with the first syllable omitted. Familiar Eastern birds about here, not noticed yesterday are: — Indigo bird, Redstart, Kentucky Warbler, Golden-crowned Thrush, White-eyed and Red-eyed Vireos, Great-crested Flycatcher, Pewee (*S. fuscus*), Wood Pewee, Kingbird and Downy Woodpecker. Shot and skinned twenty-three specimens. *May* 24. — Shot a Slender-billed Nuthatch, the first one seen. Large flights of Night-hawks at dusk. A Pectoral Sand-piper in the grass near the stream. Shot an Olive-backed Thrush (*T. Swainsonii*), and several Lark Finches; these last were first observed about St. Louis, Mo., as I was riding in company with Dr. Engelmann of that city. *May* 25. — There are a great many Bartramian Tatlers now on the prairie. Had no trouble in shooting a good bag, their tameness being in remarkable contrast to their usual shyness in places where they are much hunted. *May* 27. — More Eastern birds occur; the Warbling Vireo, Yellow-billed Cuckoo, and Scarlet Tanager. Shipped a box of specimens, and shall leave to-morrow, troops having arrived to escort the stage, in view of possible Indian hostilities. *May* 29. — Salinas, K. T. — Saw first antelope yesterday, and to-day abundance of Yellow-headed Blackbirds.”

The Journal goes on to state, that the next day we had prairie zoölogy in earnest; the Lark Bunting, Burrowing Owls, Prairie Dogs, and Buffalo. The Blackbirds were seen almost every day

while crossing the Plains. They would collect about camp in the evening, with flocks of Cowpen birds, and ramble about for food among the mules and horses turned out to graze. In spite of the season of the year, I noticed that a large part of them were in imperfect plumage, the inference from which is, that more than one year is required for them to become perfectly black and yellow. I saw them at various points along the Rio Grande, and first found them breeding a short distance west of that river, near the Pueblo of Laguna. A small stream there spreads into a marsh, overgrown with reeds and tall rank weeds; a favorable spot, that thousands of the birds had selected as a nesting place, and were then busy with the duties of incubation. Pretty much all these birds seemed to be in perfect plumage, and no young of the year had yet made their appearance.

The nest of this species is a compact, substantial structure, measuring five or six inches across, and but little less in depth. Unlike the true *Agelai*, or Marsh Blackbirds proper, these birds use no mud in the construction of the nest—perhaps because its weight would then be too much for the slender reeds to bear; the nest being placed in a tuft of upright flags or rushes, the stems of which pass through the substance of its walls, and securely fasten it, though it is liable to sway back and forth in the wind. It is plaited and woven entirely of bits of dried reeds, and long, coarse, aquatic grasses, and is not lined with different material, though the inside strands are finer than those outside. The brim of the nest is usually thickened, and folded over a little, to form a firm edge. The eggs may be from three to six in number. They resemble the eggs of the *Scolecophagi* more than those of the *Agelai*, lacking the curious straggling zigzag lines. The ground color is a pale grayish or olivaceous green, which is spotted all over with several shades of reddish-brown, sometimes so thickly, especially towards the larger end, that the ground color is scarcely perceptible. The eggs vary to a moderate degree in size and shape; two selected specimens measured respectively  $1.04 \times .75$  and  $1.15 \times .76$ .

The duties of incubation devolve mostly upon the female, and while she is setting, the male is fond of mounting the highest perch near the nest, and giving free expression to his joyful anticipations. He twists and turns about in a curious way, and sings, in a manner still more amusing, a queer melody of guttural notes, broken at intervals by an odd grating sound, and again by a few

clear syllables that sound like the tinkling of a bell. When meal time comes around, he goes off, and forages with other Benedicts about the marsh, paying, I suspect, little attention to his mate, although should she be disturbed from the nest, her cries of distress soon bring him back. It is not likely that he brings any food home; and while she is setting, she gets anything to eat that she goes after herself.

These were among the few birds I saw in the arid regions about Jacob's Well and Navajo Springs, on the confines of New Mexico and Arizona. This was in July; some were birds of the year in their first plumage, and the rest were all moulting. There were some in a marsh near Fort Whipple, but not to be compared in numbers with the vast hordes of Brewer's and Redwinged Blackbirds that live there. In this latter locality there were more of them between April and October than during the rest of the year. Such a mountainous region as that about Fort Whipple is not exactly to its liking; although, like the true *Agelai*, it gathers in marshes to breed, it is emphatically a prairie bird, delighting in broad, open, dry land. It is more decidedly terrestrial than most of its allies, and spends the greater part of its time on the ground. Compared in this respect with the Redwinged Blackbird and the *Quiscal*, it bears much the same relation to these that the species of *Harporhynchus*—the Thrasher, for instance—do to the true Mocking-birds. It is admirably adapted for a terrestrial life by its long and strong feet; on the ground, it usually walks or runs, but frequently hops along, like *Insessores* in general. In its mode of flight it closely resembles its many allies; and like these may be called omnivorous, although various seeds probably form the greater part of its food.

Jacob's Well, that I mentioned just now, is a queer place, and one always associated in my mind with these birds. Here is what I find in my note-book about it:—

“July 8.—We read of the delightful and equable climate of New Mexico; but we live and learn. Last night we shivered under blankets, and blew our numb fingers this morning. By ten o'clock it was hot; at eleven, hotter; twelve, it was as hot as—it could be. The cold nights stiffen our bones, and the hot days blister our noses, crack our lips and bring our eye-balls to a stand-still. To-day we have traversed a sandy desert; no water last night for our worn-out animals, and very little grass. The ‘sand-storms’

are hard to bear, for the fine particles cut like ground glass; but want of water is hardest of all. For some time it has been a long day's march from one spring or pool to another; and occasionally more; and then the liquid we find is nauseating, charged with alkali, tepid, and so muddy that we cannot see the bottom of a tin cup through it. Here at our noon-day halt there is not a tree—scarcely a bush—in sight, and the sun is doing his perpendicular best. In the Sibley tent the heat is simply insupportable, and we are lying curled up like rabbits in the slight shade we can find in the rain-washed crevices of the 'Well.' Jacob's Well is an undisguised blessing, and, as such, a curiosity. It is an enormous hole in the ground, right in the midst of a bare, flat plain; one might pass within a hundred yards and never suspect anything about it. The margin is nearly circular, and abruptly defined; the sides very steep—almost perpendicular in most places; but a path, evidently worn by men and animals, descends spirally, winding nearly half way around before reaching the bottom. It is, in fact, a great funnel, a hundred yards wide at the brim, and about half as deep; and at the bottom there is a puddle of green, slimy water. Tradition goes, of course, that this is a 'bottomless pit;' and as the water had not perceptibly diminished after all our party and five hundred mules and cattle had had their fill, the story may go for what it is worth. The water is bad enough—warm, and probably muddy, though the mud is not visible, owing to the rich green color of the dubious liquid. It contains, however, some suspicious looking creatures, 'four-legged fishes,' said the man who caught several with hook and line. They suck the bait like catfish, and look something like them, barring the legs and long, fringe-like gills.\*

"It is a scene of utter desolation; our bodily discomfort begets vague fears, and a sense of oppression weighs us down. The leaden minutes creep on wearily and noiselessly, unbroken even by the hum of an insect; two or three blackbirds, hopping listlessly about, as if they wished they were somewhere else but had not energy enough to go there, are the only signs of life that greet our faithful animals and ourselves."

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\* They are the *Amblystoma nebulosum*, a kind of batrachian related to the salamanders and tritons of our brooks. The body is shining green above, with a few indistinct black spots, and silvery white below; eyes and gills black; a yellow tint about the legs. They can live a long time out of water, as their skin seems to exude a sort of perspiration that keeps them cool and moist. One that was quite dry and seemed dead, revived on being placed in a bucket of water.